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SUBJECT: NEW CEC CHAIR CHUROV

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11. (SBU) Summary: On March 27, the Central Election Commission (CEC) elected Vladimir Churov as its new chairman. A physicist and St. Petersburg native, with long-standing ties to Putin, Churov announced that he would implement electoral law, not debate it. Duma members and civil society representatives predict a more loyal and lower profile chairman. Besides Churov, the new CEC leadership includes United Russia and Just Russia representation in an apparent attempt to balance the two Kremlin parties' interests. An important mid-April regional election provides the first opportunity for Churov to set the tone for his chairmanship. End summary.

The New CEC Team

12. (SBU) In a 13-2 secret ballot, Duma Deputy Vladimir Churov was elected the Central Election Commission's (CEC) new chairman. Churov was elected to the State Duma in 2003 on the LDPR ticket and has been part of the LDPR faction, although he identifies himself as not being a member of any party. He hails from St. Petersburg and was educated as a physicist. From 1992-1998, Churov worked for Putin on the Commission for External Relations in Mayor Anatoliy Sobchak's office. He has no legal background, but did serve as an OSCE election observer in Kyrgyzstan.

13. (SBU) In addition to Churov, the CEC leadership troika includes Stanislav Vavilov as the new Deputy Chairman and Nikolay Konkin as the new Secretary. Vavilov is a Presidential Administration representative and United Russia member, who previously served on the Federation Council, where he worked on the Committee for Law and Judicial Issues. Konkin, who served on the previous CEC, is a member of Just Russia and is a Federation Council representative. Golos' Liliya Shibanova speculated that the new team reflected a desire to balance United Russia and Just Russia's influence on elections.

14. (SBU) According to press reports, Churov's election was seamless, only CEC advisory member and KPRF lawyer Vadim Soloviev posed any questions, asking Churov whether he agreed with LDPR Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's more controversial statements or supported the use of "steam engine" candidates on party lists. (NOTE: This refers to the practice whereby parties put well-known members or celebrities at the head of the list, even though they would not serve if elected.)

15. (SBU) In his first remarks as Chairman, Churov announced that he saw himself as an implementer of election law, not a commentator. Duma contacts have highlighted a family connection, with Churov's father or uncle putatively having worked with Putin's father. These Duma members speculate that Churov will be a loyal and reliable CEC Chairman, who understands his "proper role" as part of the executive branch and will refrain from public dissent.

16. (SBU) Civil society contacts, keying off of Churov's comments, are pessimistic that the new CEC Chairman will continue former CEC Chairman Veshnyakov's efforts to use the Commission as a bully pulpit against additional electoral reforms that narrow the ability of opposition political parties to compete. Most emphasized his personal ties to Putin, and expect that Churov will be loyal to the Kremlin, less public, and will want to keep outsiders out of Russia's affairs. Not all observers, however, are concerned. Former CEC Chairman Aleksandr Ivanchenko (1995-1999) told reporters that since the CEC was becoming a body tasked with simply carrying out elections, rather than the more political role it had held during Russia's transition to democracy, a technocratic chairman would suffice to count the ballots.

Comment

16. (SBU) Distancing himself from former CEC Chairman Aleksandr Veshnyakov's perceived mistake of being too outspoken in opposing changes to the election law, Churov has signaled that he will lower the Chairman's profile. With the Krasnoyarsk regional election scheduled for April 15, we will soon get our first impressions regarding the tone Churov intends to set. Political commentators dub Krasnoyarsk

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Russia's "New Hampshire," since it is considered to be a microcosm of the country and indicator of political sentiment. It promises to be an important race for Churov to demonstrate how he intends to arbitrate electoral disputes.
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